Telehealth: mapping the evidence for patient outcomes from systematic reviews

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Authors’ objectives
Telehealth includes a wide range of technologies used to fulfill many functions in health care for patients with a variety of clinical conditions. For this evidence map, telehealth is defined as the use of information and telecommunications technology in health care delivery for a specific patient involving a provider across distance or time. Various types of telehealth interventions have been evaluated in thousands of research studies and hundreds of systematic reviews. The vast size of the literature and the variations in how the literature has been collected, evaluated, and synthesized make it challenging to determine what is known about the effectiveness of telehealth for specific purposes and what questions remain unanswered. The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of the large and disparate body of evidence about telehealth for use by decisionmakers. The approach used was to create an evidence map of systematic reviews published to date that assess the impact of telehealth on clinical outcomes. This evidence map describes a limited number of key characteristics of the systematic reviews currently available in order to evaluate the bodies of evidence available to inform practice, policy, and research decisions about telehealth.

Authors’ conclusions
The research literature on telehealth is vast and varied, consisting of hundreds of systematic reviews and thousands of studies of use across various clinical conditions and health care functions. • There is sufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of telehealth for specific uses with some types of patients, including—o Remote patient monitoring for patients with chronic conditions; o Communication and counseling for patients with chronic conditions; o Psychotherapy as part of behavioral health. For these telehealth applications, the research focus should shift to how to promote broader implementation and address barriers. • Additional systematic reviews may be helpful for some topics, such as consultation and maternal and child health, where primary studies are available but these have not been synthesized. • For other uses, such as triage for urgent care, telehealth is cited as offering value but limited primary evidence was identified, suggesting more studies are needed. • Future research also should assess the use and impact of telehealth in new health care organizational and payment models.

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